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ABSTRACT

Despite the fact that both national and regional statistics show that violent crimes (murder, non negligent manslaughter, aggravated assault, robbery, and forcible rape) in the U.S. have been declining in recent years, many believe that violent crime rates have been steadily escalating. Exaggerated media portrayals of violence, including both news and entertainment programming, tend to reinforce rather than to challenge myths about the prevalence of violent crime in our culture. The present investigation sought to replicate earlier research using the Perception and Experience of Violent Crime survey. This self-report measure was administered to 196 subjects who were enrolled in psychology classes during the spring and fall semesters of 2001. This research attempted to examine the extent to which perceptions of violent crime rates are exaggerated among young adults. It also assessed the relationship between actual personal experience with violent crime and general perceptions of threat, use of preventive strategies, and predicted responses to hypothetical scenarios involving crime. Changes attributable to the events of September 11, 2001, were also evaluated. (Contains 62 references.) (Author)

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Students' Misperceptions of Violence:

Affirming the Need for Better Education

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1

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2003

Abstract

Despite the fact that both national and regional statistics show that violent crimes (murder, non negligent manslaughter, aggravated assault, robbery, and forcible rape) in the U.S. have been declining in recent years, many believe that violent crime rates have been steadily escalating. Exaggerated media portrayals of violence, including both news and entertainment programming, tend to reinforce rather than to challenge myths about the prevalence of violent crime in our culture. The present investigation sought to replicate earlier research using the Perception and Experience of Violent Crime survey. This self-report measure was administered to 196 subjects who were enrolled in psychology classes during the spring and fall semesters of 2001.

This research attempted to examine the extent to which perceptions of violent crime rates are exaggerated among young adults. It also assessed the relationship between actual personal experience with violent crime and general perceptions of threat, use of preventive strategies, and predicted responses to hypothetical scenarios involving crime. Changes attributable to the events of September 11, 2001 were also evaluated.

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Factors Affecting the Perceived Increase in Violent Crime:
An Analysis of Actual and Virtual Experiences

Ubiquitous media coverage of crime may be contributing to inflated estimates of the risks of violence within American communities. Both news and entertainment programming increasingly emphasize stories about violence, creating the impression among students that their world is saturated with threat. During periods of war, these exaggerated views of modal criminal violence combine with more realistic appraisals of threats abroad, yielding high levels of anxiety and dismay among students.

Previous research (Mersky & Chambliss, 2001) documented pervasive distorted perceptions of violence among college students. The majority of the 86 undergraduate respondents in this study consistently overestimated virtually every type of criminal violence evaluated, including the prevalence of murder and rape. A large majority (87%) overestimated the risk of their being victimized by a stranger in a violent crime. Only a small minority recognized that most violent crimes are committed by people familiar to the victim.

The overwhelming majority (98%) of the participants in the Mersky & Chambliss (2001) study overestimated the percentage of violent crimes that involve use of a weapon; in actuality, no weapons are used in 75% of all violent crimes. Interestingly, these respondents also underestimated the amount of crime occurring during the day. Less than half of the participants recognized the actual decrease in violent crime that has occurred in most parts of the country. Almost half (42%) of the sample believed that they are likely to be a victim of violent crime at some point in their lives.

When actual personal experience of violent crime was assessed, Mersky & Chambliss found it to predict less passive responses to hypothetical threats. Surprisingly, those with greater actual experience showed less investment in prevention strategies and lower perception of risk. This counterintuitive finding warrants further investigation. The fact that Mersky & Chambliss (2001) found no significant relationship between actual or virtual experience of violent crime and perception of crime rate also suggest the need for replication efforts using a larger sample.

During the 1990s there was a nationwide decrease in the rate of serious crimes reported to police (Sniffen, 2000). A 7% decline in 1999 contributed to the "longest-running decline in crime on record." According to this FBI report, the seven major types of crime (including murder, robbery, rape, and assault) were down in every region of the U.S., including suburban, rural , and urban areas. In 2000, the Justice Department issued a report declaring that violent crime had dropped ten percent in the preceding year. In 1999, 7.3 million people, or roughly 33 of every 1,000 residents endured a violent attack. This figure represents a decline of 34 percent since 1993, to its lowest level since the Justice Department began its study in 1973 (Slevin, 2000). The risk of rape decreased 40% since 1993, and the risk of being threatened with a weapon decreased nearly by half.

Criminologists believe that reduction in crack use and a reduced proportion of young people in the U.S. population (who have traditionally committed a disproportionate number of crimes), have contributed to the decrease in the rate of violent crime. The success of the economy throughout the 1990s, tougher prison sentences,

stricter gun laws, more police, and smarter police strategies, may also help to explain the observed changes (*U.S. News & World Report*, 1999).

Despite this encouraging evidence, it seems that most Americans continue to view the problem of violent crime as escalating out of control. This misperception may be fueled by a variety of factors. Those with a history of actual experience of having been victimized by violent criminals might be sensitized and therefore perceive higher rates of violence around them. Former victims of crime experience flashbacks and have exaggerated fear responses to ambiguous situations (Rathus, 1993).

Alternatively, the public may maintain an exaggerated view of crime in large measure due to their virtual exposure to violence via news media reportage. According to members of a monitoring group who analyzed tapes of local evening news programs that aired the same day on 100 television stations in 35 states, "stations use sensation and tabloid journalism to manipulate and condition viewers…crime stories, mainly murder, dominate half the newscasts" (Cohen & Solomon, 1995). John McManus (as cited in Cohen & Solomon, 1995) published an account in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, which revealed that 18 of 32 stories analyzed on the news were inaccurate or misleading. McManus also discovered that stations made no effort to correct obvious omissions (Cohen & Solomon, 1995).

The power of the media to influence children was emphasized in a 1999 study by the Kaiser Family Foundation. Of particular note was the fact that the "average child between eight and eighteen years old spent six hours and forty-three minutes each day with television, video or computer games, popular music, or other media, more time than they spent in school, with parents, or engaged in any activity other than sleep. Having more contact time with children and adolescents, media has the potential to replace parents, teachers, and peers as educators, role models, and the primary source of information about the world and how one behaves in it" (Rich & Bar-on, 2001). To the extent that the news media exaggerates the rate of violence in order to attract a large audience, both children and adults might be expected to report inaccurately high rates of violent crime.

In addition to news programming, the entertainment industry continues to saturate the culture with depictions of violence in movies, TV programs, computer games, and the Internet. A 1994 study by the Center for Media and Popular Culture (Allen, 2001) reports an average of 15 violent acts being televised per channel per hour between 6 A.M. and midnight, an increase of 41 percent in only four years. Almost two-thirds of prime-time fictional dramas involve violence. (Huston et al., 1992; Feldman, 1998).

Prime time television presents a world in which crime rates are a hundred times worse than the actual rate (Stossel, 1997). The sheer pure quantity of violence on television reinforces "the idea that aggressive behavior is normal" (Gerbner, 1996). The mind of the viewer becomes "'militarized,'" and this leads to the "'Mean World Syndrome'" (Gerbner, 1996). According to Gerber, growing up in what appears to be a violence-laden culture breeds aggressiveness in some and desensitization, insecurity, mistrust, and anger in most. "Punitive and vindictive action against dark forces in a mean world is made to look appealing, especially when presented as quick, decisive, and enhancing our sense of control and security" (Gerbner, 1996). Studies have shown correlations between the amount of television viewed and general fearfulness about the world. Previous research on adults suggests that people who watch television frequently

view the world as more dangerous than those who watch infrequently. Heavy viewers tend to favor more law-and-order measures, including capital punishment, three-strikes prison sentencing, the building of new prisons (Gerbner, 1996).

A study by Hepburn (1995) revealed that watching violent TV increased aggressive tendencies in viewers and caused them to identify with violent characters. In addition, viewers are more likely to imitate aggressive models in the mass media when violence is rewarded or goes unpunished, as frequently occurs in entertainment programs (National Television Violence Study, 1996, 1997, Bandura, 1973). "Scripting" and "priming" are two ways in which viewing violent media may lead to aggressive behavior. Huesmann (1986) purported that children learn aggressive scripts for social behavior by viewing violence. Research by Berkowitz (1984) has suggested that the aggressive ideas suggested by a violent movie can prime other semantically related thoughts, heightening the chances that viewers will have other aggressive ideas in this period. Observing violence can give rise to aggressive ideation and emotions connected with violence, thereby promoting aggressive actions (Bushman, 1998). Several studies have demonstrated that priming by aggressive stimuli increases aggressive behavior (Berkowitz & Le Page, 1967; Carver et al., 1983, Experiment 2: Leyens & Dunand, 1991).

Although U.S. television is some of the most violent, increasingly videogames provide youg people with their most graphic introduction to violence. Since their advent in the late 1970s, the violence in their themes has steadily risen. Eighty percent of the most popular video games contain violence, and twenty percent of those include violence against women (Vessey & Lee, 2000).

The recording industry also sponsors extensive exposure to violent themes. Violent rape and outright murder are not only described but condoned, recommended, glamorized (Allen, 2001). The Internet has evolved into another potentially dangerous medium for violence. There are over 400 web addresses for numerous hate groups and their affiliates. The Internet has enhanced the ability of these organizations to recruit, to spread false information, and to advocate violence. Growing awareness of the potential of this medium may also be contributing to enhanced perceptions of violence.

There seems to be a widespread perception that the Internet has become a resource for those willing to commit violence, facilitating increasingly lethal acts. This belief may strengthen individuals' convictions that crime is raging out of control, whether or not that in fact is true. Unfortunately, people who believe their world to be highly dangerous are more likely to attend to stimuli in a manner that promotes the detection of threats. This selective attention thereby alters perception in a way that reinforces the original belief. In this way, people's fears and suspicions can spiral upward. Those who believe their world to be full of violent predators generally feel more justified in using violent solutions themselves. If violence is over detected in others, one's own aggression can be rationalized as retaliatory. Ironically, this paranoid stance and resultant "retaliatory" aggression typically elicits violence from others, thereby validating the original paranoid attitude.

In some instances, people act out anticipatory aggression if they reason that they are likely to be the victims of a future attack (Greenwell & Dengerink, 1993; Donnerstein & Donnerstein, 1977). Such behavior, therefore, is a result of forethought and not simply an automatic response when incited by others (Feldman, 1998). "Clearly, members of

our society take seriously the Biblical dictum, 'An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth' – even if the eye and the tooth have not yet been harmed" (Feldman, 1998).

The current study investigated general beliefs about violent crime, and the influence of both actual and virtual experiences on these beliefs. It also explored the relationship between actual and virtual experience on the likelihood of endorsing retaliatory responses to threatening situations.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were students from a small liberal arts college in Pennsylvania. A total of 196 undergraduates were involved; 86 of these students completed the survey prior to the attacks on Sptember 11, 2001 and 110 of the students participated after these attacks. Seventy-nine of the subjects were male, and 117 were female. The subjects' age range was 17 to 24 years old, with a mean age of 18.93 years. One hundred and sixty-two of the participants were white. Fourteen were African American, five were Asian American, three were Indian, one was Hispanic, and four of the respondents reported that they were "other." Seven participants chose not to respond to this question. Eighteen of the subjects said they live in a rural area. Ninety-five of the subjects said they live in the suburbs. Fifty-three of the subjects said they live in a small town. Thirty of the subjects said they live in a large city.

Materials & Procedure

In order to assess accuracy of knowledge about violent crime, participants were given 10 objective items based on factual information contained in the 2000 U.S. Census Report (see Appendix A). Items selected for the Perceived General Violence, the Perceived Personal Risk, and the Perceived Campus Violence scales were based on previous research by DeBecker (1997), Glassner (1999), The Justice Department (2000), and Prothrow-Stith (1991). The Perceived General Violence Scale consisted of eight 4-point Likert format items (1=strongly disagree, 2=somewhat disagree, 3=somewhat agree, 4=strongly agree). Questions on the Perceived General Violence Scale focused upon the perceived extent of violent crime and the perceived demographics of perpetrators ("Violent crime is out of control in this country", "Violence by urban youth has increased"). The Perceived Personal Risk Scale consisted of seven 4-point Likert format items (1=strongly disagree, 2=somewhat disagree, 3=somewhat agree, 4=strongly agree) and assessed the extent to which subjects felt safe or worried about becoming potential victims ("I feel safe walking in my neighborhood during the day", "I frequently worry about being physically attacked"). The Perceived Campus Violence Scale consisted of seven 4-point Likert format items (1=strongly disagree, 2=somewhat disagree, 3=somewhat agree, 4=strongly agree) assessing subjects' level of comfort regarding safety in specific locations on campus ("I feel safe walking on campus during daylight hours", "I feel safe using campus parking lots at night").

The Actual Experience Scale was based on responses to 37 "yes" or "no" questions pertaining to the participant's direct experience with violent crime. For example, questions included whether the respondent or the respondent's family members, friends, or acquaintances had been the victim of aggravated assault, murder, non

negligent manslaughter, or forcible rape. Subjects were also asked if they had ever witnessed a violent crime. Other questions asked whether or not the respondent had ever been attacked or threatened, and which, if any, weapons were used against them.

The Virtual Experience measure consisted of 12-items. These items assessed the subjects' amount of exposure to violent content offered via various media, including television, newspapers and magazines, books, and the Internet.

The Prevention Investment Scale was based on 13 relevant attitudinal and behavioral items. The two attitudinal items were expressed in 4-point Likert format (1=strongly disagree, 2=somewhat disagree, 3=somewhat agree, 4=strongly agree). For example, one of these questions inquired whether the respondent would ever consider purchasing a gun. The other 11 items on the Prevention Investment Scale were behavioral items asking about specific pro-active measures that the subject takes in order to prevent becoming a victim ("stay in well lit areas", "lock doors/windows", "have training in self defense", "carry mace or pepper spray"). Participants were required to answer "yes" or "no" when responding to these items.

Attitudes about the media's role in shaping attitudes toward violence were assessed through ten author-devised, 4-point Likert format items (1=strongly disagree, 2=somewhat disagree, 3=somewhat agree, 4=strongly agree). These 10 questions pertain to the assumed influence of several types of violent media experiences, including TV, newspaper and magazine articles, movies, music, video games, and the Internet.

Attitudes about reactions to threatening situations were assessed through an author-devised 4-item scale, the Hypothetical Situation Scale. Four hypothetical situations were posed and the subjects indicated if they would respond in a passive, assertive or an aggressive manner (for example, "If someone demanded you to surrender your purse or wallet, would you: drop it and run [passive], keep it and run [passive], verbally resist [assertive], or physically resist [aggressive]".

Results

Directionally adjusted item values were totaled for each participant, yielding summary scores on the Perceived General Violence, the Perceived Personal Risk, and the Perceived Campus Violence scales. Scores were similarly calculated for the Actual Experience and Virtual Experience measures. Concern about prevention was assessed by totaling the 14 relevant behavioral and attitudinal items. Attitudes about the media's role in shaping attitudes toward violence were assessed by totaling the 15 Perceived Media Role items.

Pre/Post Disaster Comparisons

Between group t-tests were performed on the data obtained pre-September 11th (data obtained in the spring of 2001), and on the data obtained post-September 11th (data obtained in the fall of 2001) to see if the attack on America had any effect on responses to the survey. No significant differences were found on the Perceived General Violence Scale, the Perceived Personal Risk Scale, or the Perceived Campus Violence Scale. Similarly, no significant differences were found on the Prevention Investment Scale, the Perceived Role of the Media Scale, or the Hypothetical Situation Scale. Given the absence of significant differences between the samples, the participants from the spring and the fall of 2001 were pooled for subsequent analyses. The failure to obtain

differences in ratings after September 11, 2001 may be due to participants' construing terrorism as distinct from violent crime.

Knowledge of Violent Crime

Responses to the individual objective knowledge items were scored for accuracy. The majority of respondents overestimated the prevalence of murder (79%) and forcible rape (66%). While in actuality for every 100,000 U.S. citizens fewer than 10 experience murder or non negligent manslaughter each year, thirty-three percent of the mistaken participants believed that 35 out of 100,000 experience murder annually, and twenty-nine percent of the mistaken participants believed that the rate was over 165 per 100,000. Seventeen percent of the participants believed the rate to be 360 per 100,000 individuals. In the case of estimates regarding rape, only twenty-five percent of the respondents correctly estimated that 35 out of 100,000 people are the victims of forcible rape each year. The majority (66%) of the respondents mistakenly overestimated the rate as being over 165 per 100,000.

Nearly half of the sample overestimated the prevalence of robbery (48%). In actuality, only 165 per 100,000 individuals experience robberies yearly. Half of the sample wrongly estimated the rate of robbery to be 360 per 100,000 yearly. Only eighteen percent of the respondents underestimated the occurrence of robbery, but it is important to note that they extremely underestimated the rate to be less than 35 per 100,000 yearly. More than half (54%)of respondents underestimated the occurrence of aggravated assault. The actual rate of this type of crime was more than twice what these subjects believed.

The large majority (80%) of participants overestimated the risk of their being victimized by a stranger in a violent encounter. Only twenty percent recognized that most violent crimes are committed by people familiar to the victim. The majority had an exaggerated perception of the risk of being a victim of violent crime at or near a person's home (80%) or in a parking lot or garage (77%).

The majority (68%) underestimated the amount of crime occurring during the day (6 a.m. to 6 p.m.). Statistics reveal that more than half of crimes committed occur during the day (between 6 a.m. and 6 p.m.). Over two-thirds (67%) of the participants overestimated the rate of violent crime committed between 6 p.m. and 12 a.m. The majority (86%) of respondents have an exaggerated perception of how much violent crime occurs between midnight and 6 a.m. Sixty percent of the sample wrongly believed that the majority of violent crimes are committed during these hours. The overwhelming majority (95%) overestimated the percentage of violent crimes that are committed involving a weapon. In seventy-five percent of all violent crimes, no weapons are present.

Perceived General Violence

Responses to the eight questions on The Perceived General Violence Scale revealed that the overwhelming majority (80%) of respondents agreed with the statement, "Violent crime is out of control in this country." Nineteen percent of the respondents somewhat disagreed, while only one of the respondents strongly disagreed with this statement.

More than half (55%) of the sample correctly recognized that statistics have shown a decrease in violent crime in recent years. Thirty-six percent of the respondents somewhat disagreed, while eight percent strongly disagreed with this statement.

Only twenty-three percent of the sample correctly strongly agreed with the statement, "Violence by urban youth has increased." Over one-quarter (26%) of the sample incorrectly disagreed with this statement. Only nineteen percent of the participants correctly responded by strongly agreeing with the statement, "Violence by small town and rural youth has increased." Fifty-two percent of the respondents somewhat agreed, while twenty-seven percent of the respondents somewhat disagreed with this statement.

Almost half (49%) of the sample incorrectly agreed with the statement, "Homicide is one of the top three leading causes of death in America." Thirty-one percent somewhat disagreed, while twenty-one percent of the participants correctly responded by strongly disagreeing with this statement.

Only one-fifth (20%) of the sample responded correctly by strongly disagreeing with the statement, "Youth homicide rates have declined over the past 30 years." Fifty-four percent of the respondents somewhat disagreed, while twenty-six percent responded incorrectly by agreeing with this statement.

Forty-six percent of the sample agreed with the statement, "A increase in the number of law enforcement officers is an indication that crime is on the rise." Forty-four percent somewhat disagreed, while ten percent strongly disagreed with this statement.

More than three-quarters (83%) of the participants correctly responded by disagreeing with the statement, "Violent urban legends are credible." Only seventeen percent incorrectly agreed with this statement.

Perceived general violence was significantly positively correlated with prevention investment ($r=.31$, $p<.01$, $n=164$). Similarly, perceived general violence was significantly positively correlated with perceived personal risk ($r=.23$, $p<.01$, $n=165$). Perceived general violence was also significantly positively correlated with the perceived role of the media ($r=.51$, $p<.01$, $n=166$).

Perceived Personal Risk

Responses to the seven questions on the Personal Risk Scale revealed that sixty percent of the respondents strongly disagreed with the statement, "I live in an unsafe neighborhood." Only three percent of the respondents strongly agreed that they live in an unsafe neighborhood.

Only four percent of the sample strongly agreed with the statement, "I feel vulnerable to violent crime." Seventy-seven percent of the respondents disagreed with the statement, "I frequently worry about being physically attacked." Therefore, it is ironic that almost half (45%) of the sample believed that they are likely to be the victim of violent crime at some point in their lives.

More than three-quarters (78%) of the sample strongly agreed with the statement, "I feel safe walking in my neighborhood during the day." Fourteen percent somewhat agreed, while only eight percent disagreed with this statement. Respondents admitted feeling less safe walking in their neighborhood at night than during the day, with less than half (49%) of the sample strongly agreeing with the statement, "I feel safe walking

in my neighborhood at night." Thirty-two percent somewhat agreed, while nineteen percent disagreed with this statement.

Only five percent of the respondents strongly believed that their personal experience is proof of America's serious crime problem. Ninety-one percent of the respondents disagreed that their personal experience is proof of America's serious crime problem. Responses to this statement suggest that the majority of this particular sample has had few actual experiences with violent crime.

Perceived personal risk of violence was significantly negatively correlated with perceived campus violence ($r=-.25$, $p<.01$, $n=161$). Perceived personal risk was found to be significantly positively correlated with perceived general violence ($r=.23$, $p<.01$, $n=165$), perceived role of the media ($r=.21$, $p<.01$, $n=166$), and prevention investment ($r=.29$, $p<.01$, $n=164$).

Perceived Campus Violence

Responses to the seven questions on The Perceived Campus Violence Scale assessed subjects' level of comfort regarding safety in specific locations on campus. An overwhelming ninety-one percent of the respondents agreed with the statement, "I feel safe in my campus residence." Only one respondent reported that he/she strongly disagreed with this statement.

Ninety-eight percent of the respondents agreed with the statement, "I feel safe walking on campus during daylight hours." Although the majority of respondents (85%) reported that they agreed with the statement, "I feel safe walking on campus at night," it is apparent that fewer students feel safe walking on campus at night than they do during the day.

Ninety-seven percent of the participants agreed with the statement, "I feel safe using campus parking lots during the day." Eighty-six percent of the participants agreed with the statement, "I feel safe using campus parking lots at night." Twelve percent of the respondents somewhat disagreed, and two percent strongly disagreed with this statement.

Forty-four percent of the sample strongly agreed with the statement, "I feel safe at campus parties." Thirty-eight percent somewhat agreed, fourteen percent somewhat disagreed, and four percent strongly disagreed with this statement.

Twenty-one percent of the respondents strongly agreed with the statement, "I have faith in the ability of campus security and college authorities to protect me." Forty-four percent somewhat agreed, twenty-one percent somewhat disagreed, and fourteen percent strongly disagreed with this statement.

Perceived campus violence was significantly negatively correlated with perceived personal risk ($r=-.25$, $p<.01$, $n=161$), and prevention investment ($r=-.36$, $p<.01$, $n=185$).

Actual Experience Scale

In this sample, there were nineteen total experiences involving murder (there were reports of 4 murdered acquaintances, 3 murdered close friends, 7 murdered extended family members, and 3 murdered family member). Two respondents reported witnessing a murder. Of these nineteen experiences, one respondent reported having three direct experiences with murder, and three respondents reported having two experiences involving murder.

In this sample, there were fourteen total experiences with nonnegligent manslaughter. Four participants had acquaintances that had been the victim of nonnegligent manslaughter, 3 participants had close friends who had been the victim of nonnegligent manslaughter, 5 participants had an extended family member who had been the victim of nonnegligent manslaughter, and 2 participants had witnessed nonnegligent manslaughter. One participant reported having three experiences involving nonnegligent manslaughter, and one participant reported having two experiences with nonnegligent manslaughter.

Experiences involving forcible rape were reported by 47 respondents. Six participants had been victims of forcible rape themselves, 21 had acquaintances that had been forcibly raped, 22 had close friends who had been raped, and 9 had family members who had been raped. Four participants had extended family members who had been raped, and one participant reported witnessing a forcible rape.

A total of 53 participants revealed that they had experiences involving aggravated assault. Ten participants had been victims of aggravated assault themselves, and 24 participants had witnessed aggravated assault. Sixteen participants said they had an acquaintance who was the victim of aggravated assault, 17 said they had a close friend who was the victim of aggravated assault, 16 reported that they had a family member who was the victim of aggravated assault, and 14 participants responded that they had an extended family member who was the victim of aggravated assault.

The most common actual experience of violent crime reported by participants involved robbery. A total of 127 experiences of this crime were reported; 20 reported personal experience with robbery (either being robbed themselves or witnessing someone else's robbery), 34 participants had family members, and 22 had extended family member victims of robbery, 29 had close friend victims, and 22 had acquaintances that had been robbed.

Correlational analyses also showed that actual experience of violence was significantly positively associated with reaction in hypothetical situations ($r=.35$, $p<.01$, $n=164$). Those reporting greater actual experience were less likely to anticipate responding passively to threats (low actual experience: $x=8.17$; $s.d.= 2.37$, $n=70$ versus high: $x=9.21$, $s.d.= 2.81$, $n=115$).

A median split was used to create two groups based on actual experience of violence (low and high). A one-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to determine the effect of actual experience with violent crime on the five dependent variables (general, personal, campus, prevention, hypothetical). Significant differences were found among two of the dependent measures (campus and hypothetical) for actual experience of violent crime. Wilks' Lambda=.92, $F(5, 145)=2.52$, $p<.05$. Those with low actual experience of violent crime feel safer on campus than those with high actual experience of violent crime (low actual experience: $x=24.29$; $s.d.=3.05$, $n=70$ versus high: $x=23.00$; $s.d.=4.08$, $n=115$). Results from the MANOVA also revealed that respondents with high actual experience of violent crime would react more assertively/aggressively in the four hypothetical situations than those with low actual experience of violent crime (low actual experience: $x=8.17$; $s.d.=2.37$, $n=70$ versus high: $x=9.21$; $s.d.=2.81$, $n=115$).

Virtual Experience Scale

Slightly over one-fifth (21%) of the respondents said that they watch crime shows on TV. Over half (57%) of the respondents said they watch drama shows on TV. Almost half (48%) of the participants reported that they watch televised sporting events. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of the participants revealed that they watch televised news programs. The majority (86%) of the respondents reported that they watch televised comedies. A minority report watching other types of programs (cartoons: 37%; game shows: 28%; other: 20%).

Correlational analyses revealed that virtual experience of violence was not significantly associated with perceptions of either general or campus violence. Virtual exposure to violence was also unrelated to perceived personal risk and endorsement of retaliatory aggression in threatening situations.

A median split was used to create two groups based on virtual experience of violence (low and high). A one-way multivariate analysis of variance was conducted to determine the effect of virtual experience with violent crime (high vs low) on the five dependent variables (general, personal, campus, prevention, hypothetical). No significant differences were found.

Prevention Investment

Responses to the thirteen questions on The Prevention Investment Scale revealed some of the measures taken by respondents to prevent becoming the victim of violent crime. More than half (57%) of the respondents walk in groups at night. Almost two-thirds (63%) of the respondents stay in well-lit areas at night.

The overwhelming majority (94%) of respondents reported that they do not carry a weapon as a form of prevention from becoming a victim of violent crime. A mere nine percent of the respondents carry mace or pepper spray.

Over two-thirds (69%) of the respondents claimed that they tell people their plans before leaving, and sixty-nine percent said that they never go to strange places alone. More than half (58%) of the respondents reported that they carry a cell phone.

The overwhelming majority (82%) of participants lock their doors and windows as a form of prevention, while only twenty-eight percent alarm their car or home. Eighteen percent of this sample has training in self-defense. Only two percent of the sample reported that they take other precautionary measures in addition to the ones mentioned above in order to prevent themselves from becoming the victims of violent crime.

Perceived general violence was significantly positively correlated with prevention investment ($r=.31$, $p<.01$, $n=164$). Correlational analyses revealed that perceived campus violence was significantly negatively associated with prevention investment ($r=-.36$, $p<.05$, $n=185$). Prevention investment was found to be significantly negatively correlated with reactions in hypothetical situations ($r= -.27$, $p<.01$, $n=188$).

Prevention investment was significantly positively correlated with the perceived role of the media ($r=.40$, $p<.01$, $n=165$). Prevention investment was also significantly positively correlated with perceived personal risk of violence ($r=.29$, $p<.01$, $n=164$).

Perceived Role of the Media

Responses to the ten questions pertaining to the assumed influence of several types of violent media experiences revealed that over half (60%) of the respondents agreed with the statement, "Television makes people insensitive to violent crime." Twenty-five percent of the respondents somewhat disagreed, while fifteen percent strongly disagreed with this statement. Fifty-two percent of the participants agreed with the statement, "Television news reports are proof of America's serious crime problem." Thirty-four percent of the participants somewhat disagreed, and fourteen percent strongly disagreed.

Half of the respondents agreed with the statement, "Newspaper and magazine articles are proof of America's serious crime problem." Thirty-nine percent of the respondents somewhat disagreed, and eleven percent strongly disagreed with this statement.

More than half (60%) of the respondents agreed with the statement, "Media reports validate fear of crime." Twenty-seven percent somewhat disagreed, and twelve percent strongly disagreed with this statement.

Over half (53%) of the sample agreed with the statement, "Violence in movies makes people insensitive to crime." Thirty percent of the respondents somewhat disagreed, while seventeen percent strongly disagreed with this statement.

Only eight percent of the participants strongly agreed with the statement, "Music CDs desensitize listeners to violent crime." Thirty-three percent of the participants somewhat agreed, while fifty-nine percent disagreed with this statement.

Nearly half (40%) of the respondents agreed with the statement, "Graphic images on the Internet make some people behave violently." Thirty-five percent of the respondents somewhat disagreed, and twenty-five percent strongly disagreed with this statement. Three-quarters of the respondents agreed with the statement, "The Internet provides details about how to commit violent crimes." Twenty-three percent of the respondents somewhat disagreed, and only three percent strongly disagreed with this statement.

The overwhelming majority (84%) of respondents agreed with the statement, "The majority of videogames involve some form of violence." Only sixteen percent of the respondents disagreed with this statement. Thirty-one percent of the respondents agreed with the statement, "Playing videogames increases the tendency of individuals to act violently." Thirty-six percent of the respondents somewhat disagreed, and thirty-three percent strongly disagreed with this statement.

Perceived role of the media was found to be significantly positively correlated with perceived general violence ($r=.51$, $p<.01$, $n=166$). The perceived role of the media was also significantly positively correlated with prevention investment ($r=.40$, $p<.01$, $n=165$), and with perceived personal risk ($r=.21$, $p<.01$, $n=166$).

Responses to Hypothetical Situations

Reactions to a threat of violent crime were assessed by posing four hypothetical situations to the subjects. Responses to these hypothetical situations indicated whether the subjects would react in a passive, assertive or an aggressive manner.

It was found that when subjects were demanded to surrender their purses or wallets, over half (58%) of the respondents would react in a passive manner ("drop it and run" or "keep it and run"). In the hypothetical situation of being followed to one's car, almost three-quarters of the respondents (70%) would react in a passive, non-aggressive manner ("run to the car and lock the doors").

In the hypothetical case where the subject's boyfriend/girlfriend was threatened while in his/her presence, the majority (40%) of respondents would react in a passive, non-aggressive manner ("run away together"). Thirty-eight percent of the respondents admitted that they would react assertively by confronting the person verbally. If a suspicious person had entered the subject's residence, more than three quarters (79%) of the respondents said they would react in a passive manner ("leave the premises" or "lock yourself in your room and call authorities").

Correlational analyses revealed that reactions to hypothetical situations was significantly negatively correlated with prevention investment ($r=-.27$, $p<.01$, $n=188$).

Gender Effects

A MANOVA was conducted to determine if there were any gender effects on the five dependent variables (general, personal, campus, prevention, hypothetical situations). Significant gender effects were found on three of the dependent variables (campus, $p<.003$, prevention, $p<.001$, and hypothetical, $p<.001$). Wilks' Lambda=.64 is significant, $F(5, 145)=16.26$, $p<.01$. It was found than males feel safer on campus and are more likely to react in an assertive/aggressive manner than females. It was also found that women invest more effort in taking preventive measures than males.

Because the MANOVA revealed that both actual experience and gender were affecting the same dependent variables, an assessment of the correlation between gender and actual experience of violent crime was conducted to determine if a gender confound was present. Because the results of the correlation were not significant, the results obtained are not attributable to inadvertent confounding.

Discussion

The results of this study largely affirmed the Mersky & Chambliss (2001) findings. This larger sample consistently misperceived violent crime rates in the U.S., and expressed the belief that violent crime is out of control in this country. The young adults surveyed reported an exaggerated view of the risks of murder, non-negligent manslaughter, forcible rape, and robbery. The overwhelming majority overestimated the percentage of violent crimes that are committed involving a weapon. The large majority of participants exaggerated the risk of their being victimized by a stranger in a violent encounter. Very few participants recognized that most violent crimes are committed by people familiar to the victim. The majority of respondents have an exaggerated

perception of the risk of being a victim of violent crime at or near a person's home or in a parking lot or garage. The majority of respondents also have an exaggerated perception of how much violent crime occurs between midnight and 6 a.m. Sixty-five percent of the sample wrongly believes that the majority of violent crimes are committed during these hours.

In contrast, the participants tended to underestimate the rates of aggravated assault. The majority of respondents also underestimated the amount of crime occurring during the day. Statistics reveal that more than half of crimes committed actually occur during the day (between 6 a.m. and 6 p.m.). These faulty beliefs are largely consistent with their impression that "crime is out of control in this country." Interestingly, despite their general sense that crime is rampant, they do not seem to see their own immediate environment as particularly dangerous. For example, a mere three percent of the sample believes that they live in an unsafe neighborhood, and only seven percent feel very unsafe walking in their neighborhood at night.

While widespread dissemination of more accurate information about violent crime rates might improve young adults' knowledge, it is also possible that selective attention might distort this audience's response to such educational efforts. If learning the potential personal relevance of such information heightens the salience of the message's threatening component, more coverage of the violent crime issue may simply exacerbate the already exaggerated perceptions. As the result of selective attention, the audience may vividly remember the notion that various violent crimes occur, and forget the details regarding low prevalence. As a result, educational efforts here might inadvertently backfire.

Those with a high personal history with violent crime were significantly more likely to anticipate responding actively and even aggressively to future threatening encounters, as compared to those with low actual experience with violent crime. Consistent with observation from previous research, this study noted that actual personal experience with violent crime failed to motivate greater investment of energy in preventive practices. This is congruent with the somewhat surprising finding that actual experience is not associated with higher perceptions of general violence threat. In fact, as also noted in the previous study, participants with a stronger history of actual violence actually rated the general level of threat as being lower. This replication of Mersky & Chambliss (2001) corroborated most of the earlier findings. Future research using a non-undergraduate sample might be useful in assessing the generalizability of these conclusions to other age groups.

Neither actual nor virtual experience with violent crime was significantly related to perceptions of crime rates, either generally or specifically on the campus. This seems largely attributable to substantial homogeneity in how all participants perceived the risk of violent crime. Regardless of personal or media exposure to violent crime information, the majority of students perceived violent crime to be quite common.

It may be that the culture is so saturated with messages about the ubiquity of violent crime that differential viewing of particular types of television programs and movies contribute little to people's impressions about crime. This study specifically assessed exposure to televised news programs, however this source of virtual exposure to crime did not appear to have an influence over the subject's misperception of the rate of violent crime.

Virtual experience of violent crime was not significantly related to how participants expected they would respond to various threatening situations. High media exposure to violent crime content did not appear to make students more likely to anticipate retaliating or responding in an aggressive manner to threatening encounters. General impressions about the prevalence of violent crime were also not associated with the tendency to anticipate responding aggressively to threatening situations. This challenges the notion that exaggerated perceptions of risk fuel defensive overreaction.

Pre/post disaster comparisons failed to show significant changes on any of the dependent measures. It is quite surprising that the September 11th attack on America failed to produce any measurable changes in perceptions of violent crime. One explanation may be that these subjects did not encode the terrorist attack as an example of "violent crime." Subjects may have compartmentalized their thinking and as a result may see terrorism as separate from violent crime. Although the Bush administration responded to the attack as a criminal matter, the public may not have seen it in such terms.

Another explanation for these findings is that most respondents were not personally, directly affected by the terrorist attack. This explanation is consistent with this study's findings because more salient actual experiences of violent crime, as opposed to virtual or vicarious experiences of violent crime, were more influential in shaping attitudes and responses to provocation. This study suggests that actual, personal experiences with violent crime are most determinative of attitudes and response tendencies related to this problem.

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